

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

REDUCING HOMELESS-RELATED CRIME

The Police, Disorder, and the Homeless

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The general idea of dealing with disorderly conditions to prevent crime, as developed in the “broken windows theory” (Wilson and Kelling, 1982), is present in a myriad of police strategies ranging from “order maintenance” and “zero-tolerance” policing strategies, where the police attempt to impose order through strict enforcement, to “community” and “problem-oriented policing” strategies in which police attempt to produce order and reduce crime through cooperation with community members and by addressing specific recurring problems (Cordner, 1998; Eck and Maguire, 2000; Kelling and Coles, 1996; Skogan, 2006). Although its application can vary within and across police departments, policing disorder to prevent crime is now a common crime control strategy. Dealing with social and physical disorder associated with homeless populations is a central concern of these policing strategies.

Berk and MacDonald (2010, this issue) present the findings of their evaluation of the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI), which is an intervention implemented by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) intended to reduce serious crimes by addressing disorderly conditions associated with homeless encampments in the Skid Row section of downtown Los Angeles. Their evaluation suggests that the SCI generated some modest reductions in violent, property, and nuisance street crimes with no evidence of significant spatial crime displacement. Although the available research evidence does not demonstrate consistent theoretical connections between disorderly conditions and more serious crime (Harcourt, 1998; Sampson and Raudenbush, 1999; Skogan, 1990; Taylor, 2001), a growing body of evidence suggests policing disorder strategies may generate crime control benefits nonetheless. It is important to recognize that the available evaluation evidence is not unanimous in supporting this perspective. For instance, a quasi-experimental evaluation of a quality-of-life policing initiative focused on social and physical disorder in four target zones in Chandler, Arizona, did not find any significant reductions in serious crime associated with the strategy (Katz, Webb, and Schaefer, 2001). However, as discussed by Piquero

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(2010, this issue), the study by Berk and MacDonald (2010) joins some mounting evidence that suggests dealing with disorderly conditions may indeed control crime.

Five sophisticated statistical analyses of the effects of policing disorder on violent crime trends in New York City in the 1990s have been conducted. With the exception of the study by Harcourt and Ludwig (2006), four of these analyses found statistically significant associations between the New York Police Department (NYPD) strategy and decreased violent crime, with the effects ranging from small (Messner et al., 2007; Rosenfeld, Fornango, and Rengifo, 2007) to large (Corman and Mocan, 2002; Kelling and Sousa, 2001). Other macro-level analyses of the relationship between misdemeanor arrests and more serious crimes have generated results supportive of policing disorder strategies (Sampson and Cohen, 1988; Worrall, 2002). Two randomized controlled trials in Jersey City, NJ (Braga et al., 1999), and Lowell, MA (Braga and Bond, 2008), found that problem-oriented policing strategies that focused on social and physical disorder resulted in significant reductions in citizen calls for service and crime incidents in violent crime hot spots with little evidence of immediate spatial displacements. Finally, in the Netherlands, Keitzer, Lindenberg, and Steg (2008) conducted six field experiments examining the links between disorder and more serious crime and concluded that dealing with disorderly conditions was an important intervention to halt the spread of further crime and disorder.

The available research evidence also points to the importance of addressing “how” policing disorder programs are implemented. Questions have been raised about the legitimacy of specific tactics used by the police to control disorder. Inappropriate policing disorder strategies, such as the indiscriminate aggressive tactics used in zero-tolerance approaches, can have negative impacts on police–community relationships. For instance, the heightened use of arrests for minor crimes, such as public drinking and smoking marijuana in plain view, in the NYPD’s order maintenance policing strategies have been criticized as exacerbating already poor relationships between the police and minority communities and increasing citizen complaints about police misconduct and abuse of force (Golub, Johnson, and Dunlap, 2007; Greene, 1999; Harcourt and Ludwig, 2007). Michael White (2010, this issue) questions whether the enforcement actions taken by the LAPD in the SCI represent “good policing” practices suggested by community and problem-oriented policing advocates. John Eck (2010, this issue) raises concerns about the potential for misinterpretation, misapplication, and misuse of the policing strategy described by Berk and MacDonald (2010) and suggests additional clarity on the units of homelessness (specific places vs. large areas) and specifying the nature of the treatment of homeless encampments and other forms of enforcement used outside of the encampments.

Berk and MacDonald (2010) observe rightly that the SCI was not designed to be a long-term strategy to address homelessness in Los Angeles or to respond to the social and personal problems presented by homelessness. However, the policy essays by Culhane (2010, this issue), Piquero (2010), Rowe and O’Connell (2010, this issue), and Vitale (2010, this issue) make suggestions on how to craft more ambitious (and legitimate) police strategies to address crime and disorder problems associated with homeless populations and on how to reduce homeless

populations. These suggestions include ensuring that police officers are connecting indigent homeless people to available services, working with community groups and nonprofit agencies to establish permanent housing with appropriate support services (even for people with mental health and drug abuse problems), engaging in community asset mapping and community development efforts, and developing interdisciplinary homeless outreach teams.

Dealing with disorderly conditions to prevent more serious crimes has become, and is likely to remain, a central crime control strategy used by modern police agencies. The available research evidence and normative discussions on good policing practices suggests that many police departments need to be more refined in their approach to crime and disorder issues. Policing disorder programs infused with community and problem-oriented policing principles, such as focusing on specific hot spot locations, adopting alternative strategies to modify the conditions that give rise to crime and disorder problems at these places, and forming strategic partnerships with community-based and social service organizations, seem best positioned to generate both crime control gains and better police–community relations.

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